

PART VIII: Fish Tales – Lies, Lures & Legends

Bay in the Balance



By DAVID CUTLER

It was the mid 1970s, an early Saturday night in late July, and the tide was just starting to turn. Charlie Bourget aboard his 21-foot Mako, "The Huntress," was maneuvering on the edge of the Kingston channel just off Standish Shore.

It was as though he was trying to park a Buick in Harvard Square. A few feet to the right, forward, then to the left. A little more to the right. Drop anchor off the port bow, then the starboard bow. Let the current do its work and two more anchors are dropped off the port and starboard stern. "The Huntress" was locked in.

As he waited for more water to move into the bay, Bourget leisurely chopped a mackerel into large chunks, baited four trolling rods with 30-pound test line and carefully cast them out. That done, he set the drags and placed the rods into four rod holders, two up front and two astern.

"It'll be a few minutes," he said, as he popped a beer and settled comfortably into his

"Anytime now," he said.

Twice during the next 20 minutes, he left his seat and quietly moved around the console to adjust the four anchor lines, keeping them taut so "The Huntress" would remain locked in place. As he was tightening the last line in the stern, the first low sound came from the starboard bow. "ZZ, ZZZ, ZZZZ." The rod bent and quivered as the line shot out. "ZZZZZZZ."

"Here's the first one," yelled Bourget as he grabbed the rod, snapped the drag shut and yanked. The rod warped forward, the tip jerking wildly. On the other end, thrashing below, was what would prove a magnificent catch — a 37-inch, 38-pound striped bass. It would be



Charter skipper David Bitters hoists a keeper bass he caught in the bay.

the first of four big stripers hauled aboard "The Huntress" over the next hour. All were



MAMMA MIA, WHAT A FISH — With smiles all around, Greg Smith and family pose with a massive cow striper taken while trolling off Duxbury Beach. (Courtesy of David Bitters)

that he later sold to Fiddler's Green (nee the Sun Tavern). Before serving it, proprietor David Wells had the prize on display in a bucket of ice. Up close, the fish seemed mammoth.

Duxbury Bay has as many fish stories as it does good fishermen and in recent years, after a prolonged dry spell in the '80s, the striped bass fishing is as good as it ever was. In late September, charter skipper David Bitters, fishing with clients in the bay, landed a 26-pound, 43-inch bass which he caught on a rubber crank bait.

"We were off a bank on the edge of a deep channel," he recalled. "I was down about 30 feet when the fish hit. Then he

Two weeks ago, he spotted the familiar "boiling" mayhem that blues often create when chasing baitfish.

"It was a true feeding frenzy," he said. "Just east of the basin on the flats. The blues were going wild and it lasted for almost two hours. It was a genuine frenzy. You could throw anything at them — poppers, metal jigs, anything. They were chasing those small pogies (menhaden), the peanut bunkers we call them."

Jarvis can cite a long list of fish that can be caught in the bay — striped bass and blues, of course, but also mackerel, cod, pollock, tautog, black sea bass, dog fish, menhaden, smelt, winter flounder and fluke (summer).

And every once in a while, when a tern or seagull is diving for bait fish, it will end up in the jaws of the monkfish. It is not a pretty sight.

Both Bitters and Jarvis say the blues are starting to get bigger again — not as large as the 23 pounders that occasionally showed up in the late '70s and early '80s, but definitely bigger. Some as big as 14 pounds, said Jarvis.

The fluke population appears to be stable, but Jarvis says the winter flounder catch is down and he blames at least part of the decline on the fish-catching skills of cormorants, a black duck-like bird that dives deep to find its prey.



Some of the fish you may find in Duxbury Bay

Duxbury Bay is an Estuarine (deepwater tidal habitats and adjacent tidal wetlands, brackish water)

ANADROMOUS

grows in salt migrates to fresh to spawn

- Alewife
- Blue back Herring
- Striped Bass
- Rainbow Smelt

CATADROMOUS

makeshift seat in the bow. His two guests sat atop a bait box in the stern, complying with his instructions to "keep it quiet." The only sounds came from shore.

keepers in any age. Bourget's success in landing big bass knew few bounds in those days. A week earlier, fishing off Bug Light, he had caught a 55-pound cow (female) striper

took off. He must have taken 180 yards of line. I was almost out."

With his drag set tight on a 20-pound test line, Bitters worried that the line would snap. To gain the upper hand, his set his flat boat into reverse, then saw his line snag on a lone lobster pot. "I thought the fish was gone; then one of the clients started pulling up the pot. He pulled in about 10 feet and there was the fish, wrapped around the pot (rope). It was something!"

With his flat boat, Bitters does a lot of fly fishing for bass and bluefish, using his own fly – the Baymen Universal. He's a practitioner of what he calls sight fishing. "You actually see the fish in shallow water, then cast. We look for boils, baitfish, rips and sometimes we chase the birds."

As a charter skipper for the past 34 seasons, Roger Jarvis has fished most everywhere, particularly at The Race off Provincetown which is renowned for superior blue fishing. But he's also had major successes in the bay aboard his 26-foot power cat, the "Jazz."

mer flounder). Aside from the dogfish and occasional skate, the shark family stays out of the bay...with an occasional exception. Jarvis explains:

"I remember about three years ago when a guy caught a five-foot blue shark off the bridge. I kid you not. He was fishing for bass; he had a chunk on the bottom when the shark hit. It was probably chasing a school of baitfish up the channel. The guy brought it in. He fought it for a long time and it eventually tired and he walked the bridge to get it in."

The rare blue shark aside, Duxbury Bay is home to few exotic species. This writer once caught a sea trout (so identified by Carl Santheson at the Snug Harbor Fish Market) and once spotted a dead goosefish or monkfish on a flat off Standish Shore. Though tasty and in demand on seafood menus, the monkfish is singularly unattractive. It has a body shaped like a cone and is equipped with a giant mouth, which snaps shut on unsuspecting fish that come too close. Generally monkfish live on the bottom but occasionally one will swim to the surface.

to salt to spawn
-American Eel

SALTWATER

- Bluefish
- Flounder
- Tautog
- Cunner
- Scup
- Black sea bass
- Long horned sculpins
- Striped Sea Robin
- Menhaden (Pogies)
- Mackerel
- Mummichogs
- Striped Killfish
- Silversides
- Cod
- Periwinkles
- Rock, sand, and mud crabs
- Hemigrapsus
- European green crab
- Whelks (snails)
- Hermit crabs
- Horseshoe crabs
- Mussels (Blue + Ribbed)
- Shrimps
- Pollock
- Sharks (sand sharks)
- Spiny & Smooth dogfishes
- Skates
- Lobster
- Monkfish
- Razor clams
- Soft-shell clams
- Bay Scallops (few)
- Oysters

Source: Gregg Morris, Manomet Center for Conservation Science



Adam Johnson of Stockade Path hauled this 41-inch prize while fishing off the bridge in June. He had to walk the bridge to bring it in from shore.

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Trading Lobster Tales with Billy Bennett

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

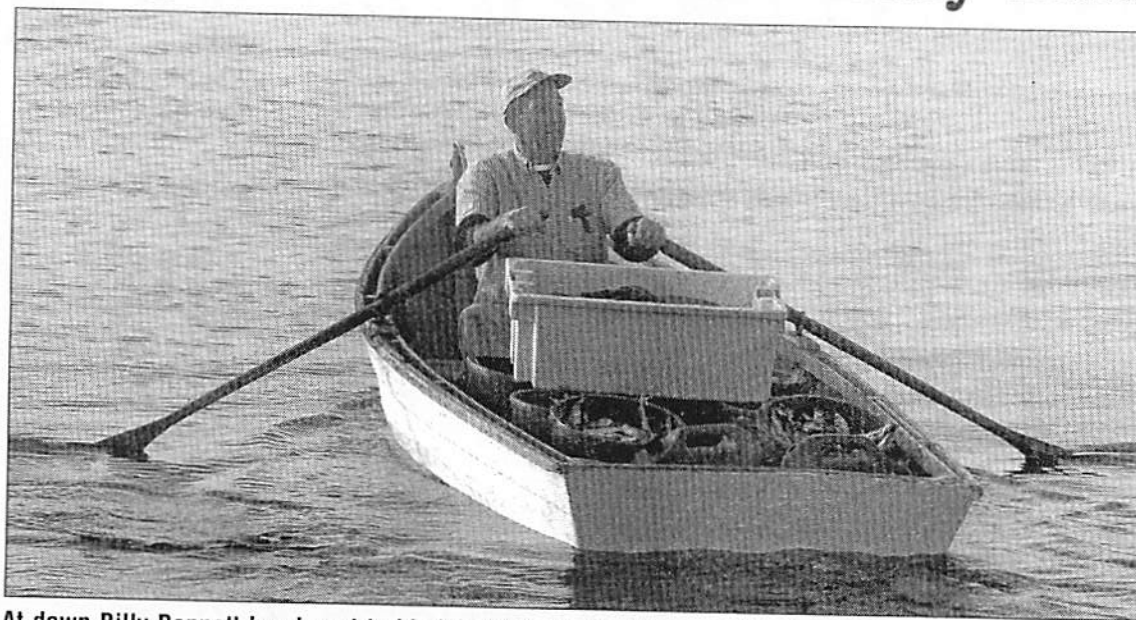
Billy Bennett was born to be a lobsterman. As a young boy growing up on Saquish, he developed a precocious appreciation for Duxbury Bay and its resources. When he was "knee high to a grasshopper," Bennett spent countless mornings pulling up traps with his cousin and uncles, all professional lobstermen.

Today, Bennett's 15-year old grandson visits each August to learn the trade and help his grandfather haul in the day's catch.

For 25 years, Bennett worked in the family's local business, Bennett Tire but still kept a hand in fishing whether it was digging clams or catching tuna fish. Then in 1982, Bennett traded in the tires for lobster traps, retired from the family business, and pursued his second love (his wife Nancy being the first.) He never regretted the decision. "I finally



Bennett's lobster boat, the "Nancy L" is named for his wife and daughter. Photo by D. Grossman



At dawn Billy Bennett heads out to his lobster boat, the "Nancy L," to begin another 12-hour day. His rowboat is loaded with bait for his lobster traps.

Photo by David Grossman

boats because of its size—small enough for one person to handle, but large enough to take anywhere. Wooden lobster boats have a shorter life span, he said, and require more maintenance.

Spring, when lobsters migrate in from the deep waters, marks the start of lobster season for Billy Bennett. His workdays begin when most Duxbury residents are sleeping. By summer, he will start his 12-hour day at three in the morning. It begins with the bait man at Brant Rock, then, off to the "Nancy L" moored in the harbor near the town pier where he will load up and head out as dawn breaks.

The biggest job, said

boats allows fisherman to haul in many more traps a day than they could years ago.

Bennett usually does his lobster fishing alone. It's solitary work—a sort of old man and the sea existence—compared with other careers, and as Bennett admits, it can be lonely. But he wouldn't trade it for any other work. "Where do I begin," he said on why he loves lobster fishing, "It's the independence and being with nature. I'm not a really religious man, but being out there is like being in church all the time."

When Bennett worked in the family tire business, he was responsible for eight to 10 people, and there would be problems with staff, he said. Lobster fishing, though "not as good financially," doesn't have those issues. Bennett wouldn't trade daybreak on the bay or the sound of the "wind whistling out there" for a lucrative office job.

"I did this by choice, lots do it by necessity," explained Bennett about his decision. He finds that with any type of fishing career, "if you don't love it,

the shorebirds are "just waking up," and there are no people, except a few fishermen and sometimes a rower or two. "It's the best time of day on the bay; it's too beautiful for words."

How many lobsters he will find in a trap will depend on the season, weather, and the lobster's shedding process. Temperatures impact the harvest of lobsters, which prefer gradual changes. A season of sudden change and drops in temperature will mean a bad year for the lobsterman. A fisherman must always adjust his fishing areas depending on season and the lobsters' shedding process. A string of eight lobster pots may bring only one or three lobsters per catch during off-season while the fall could bear 25 to 30 lobsters. "If you looked at it as an average in Duxbury, you trap about a half a lobster per pot year round," said Bennett.

The amount of catch is also related to the lobster's growth stage. Lobsters grow by shedding their shells. Bennett and his brethren call them "jelly rolls." At this stage, the lobster is vulnerable to the stripe bass and codfish until its new shell hardens, which takes three weeks to a month. During the shedding process, lobsters gravitate toward rocky areas to protect themselves. Once their shells harden, they move into open waters and go on feeding.

A Look at Duxbury's Commercial Lobster Industry

to do," he said.

He already owned a JC Lobster boat, a 32-foot long, 12-foot wide fiberglass traditional lobster boat with forward cabin. "It's like my right arm," he says of his boat, "The Nancy L," named after his wife and daughter. He prefers it to other

Bennett, is hauling the traps up over the boat when you're moving 300 traps on a good day. This is half of his total traps. (State and federal laws currently limit commercial lobstermen who are fishing within 25 miles from shore to a total of 800 traps.) Today's hydraulic machinery on lobster

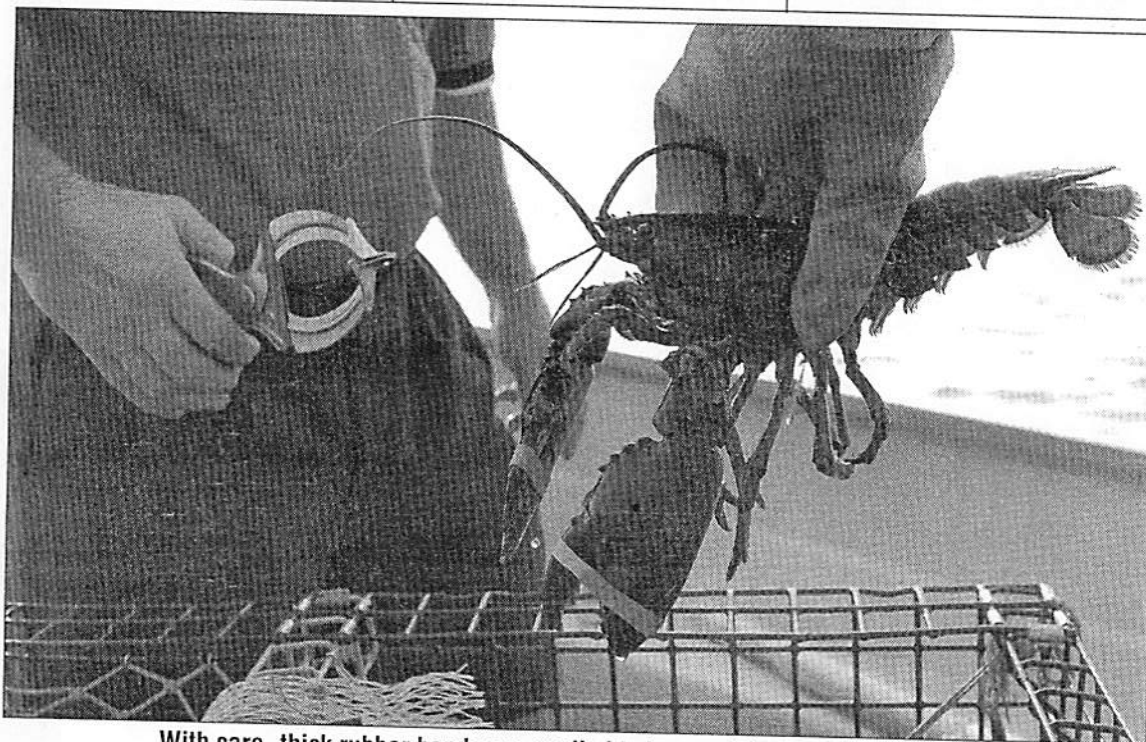
	2000	1995	1990	1985	1980
Fishermen	8	10	5	u/a	u/a
Total Pounds	58,285	86,814	44,257	43,261	25,701
Price per lb ¹	3.65	3.20	2.46	2.47	2.14
Catch Value	\$212,740	\$277,805	\$108,872	\$106,855	\$55,000

Note: Source of information is Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries Catch Reports. Lobstermen are required to file a catch report annually; and total pounds may be undervalued for this reason.

1- Wholesale price

binges to fill their new body. This means bigger catches for lobstermen. "Fall is always a really good time because it's after the lobsters shed their shell, and they are hungry and out feeding," said Bennett.

Today in Duxbury, there are six commercial lobstermen, including Bennett, fishing these waters. In 1999, eight Duxbury fishermen caught a total of 61,744 pounds of inshore lobster ranking them 34th in the state. Based on an average price of \$3.74 per pound, the value of their catch was \$230,922. In 1895, it took a Duxbury lobsterman a week to trap nine hundred big lobsters and for that he received six cents each.



With care, thick rubber bands are applied to keep a lobster's claws in check.

Photo by David Grossman

you have a real problem" because it's so time consuming. "And, you would be miserable under the adverse conditions," for which there are many in this business, such as the six to eight foot waves, a residual from a tropical storm, that Bennett battled recently as he hauled up the traps. There's also the breaking of ice to get your boat out of the harbor, and then worrying if you will be able to get back in with your catch. "It's not for everyone, and I see a lot come and go."

The pleasures far out weigh the adversities for this lobsterman. "Every day on the bay is different, the sky is different, and I never get tired of seeing dawn." He describes the tranquility of daybreak when

Bay in the Balance



CREDITS

The Bay in the Balance series is edited by David Cutler. Special thanks to David Grossman for providing much of the photography for this series. For more of his work visit www.gurnetroad.com

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